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THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND

TEMPERANCE SOCIETY

AND

THE RECENT ELECTIONS.

A LETTER

ADDRESSED TO THE RIGHT HON. EARL STANHOPE

BY

THE REV. HENRY J. ELLISON,

CHAPLAIN IN ORDINARY TO THE QUEEN,

HONORARY CANON OF CHRIST CHURCH, AND RECTOR OF HASELEY.

(Chairman of the C. E. T. S.)

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The Church of England Temperance Society and the Recent Elections.



MY LORD,

It is now some three months since—the country being then in the throes of the electioneering contest—your Lordship did us the favour of calling at our London Offices to make a communication on the subject of the pending elections. It had been represented to you that in one important constituency at least—the town of Cambridge—the Society, through its paid Agents and Branches, was taking an active part in canvassing for the Liberal candidates, and you came to ascertain the truth of the charge. The representation, it is needless to say, was met on the part of the Society, with immediate enquiry, and the result as communicated to your Lordship, was, I believe, entirely satisfactory ; proving, as it did, that whatever might be the case with individual members, the Society, as represented by its Local Committee and accredited Agents, was taking no part in the contest.

Since then similar charges have reached us from a variety of quarters. Thus, in the sister University Town of Oxford, I was assured by a very influential person that the Agent was using his position to turn Conservative voters against the Conservative candidate; that the election would probably turn upon this (and after the election that it had done so); that as the Society had become a political one, Conservative Churchmen must not be expected to belong to it. From the Carlton Club we were informed by more than one member that reports were "reaching them every day of the strong adverse interest which our Society was exercising in the Borough Elections throughout the country." And with every such representation came the threatened withdrawal of individual Conservatives, and even of the whole Conservative party, from all connection with the Society.

It would be necessary, therefore, if only in the interests of the Society itself, that the fullest investigation should be made into the truth of such charges. This has been done, to the best of our ability, with a result which I shall presently mention. But in the course of our inquiries, other and graver issues have presented themselves, affecting not the Society only, but the Church and political parties—issues so momentous that I venture to take advantage of your Lordship's high character and position to place them before you, and through you, perhaps before a wider circle of readers than they might otherwise have reached.

Before I address myself to the allegations before mentioned, it will be desirable that I should explain in what sense and to what extent our Society may be said to be

“political.” It is political only so far as, irrespective of party, it seeks for legislative reform in the laws regulating the liquor traffic; and this not by any means as its first object. The Society had its origin where every Church movement should properly originate, in the personal experience, on the part of its founders, of the sins and sufferings of the people, and the desire to find a remedy for them. Clergymen having the cure of souls in large towns, brought into daily contact with the terrible evil of intemperate drinking, with all its attendant results, and conscious that somehow or other they had missed the true method of dealing with the sin, found it in parochial Temperance Societies, specially organised for bringing the Church’s work—or in other words, the saving power of the Gospel—to bear upon these alienated and perishing souls.

It was while engaged in this work, and so far as the rescue of the intemperate was concerned, with results, which, but for their confidence in the spiritual weapons entrusted to them, must have astonished even themselves, that they became acquainted with the causes, which in the course of years, had brought about this terrible demoralization. Foremost among them was the vast network of temptation, with which the working classes were surrounded, by the present public house system. If the true province of legislation, in the words of the present Prime Minister, was “to make it easy for the people to do good, difficult to do evil,” the process here seemed to have been reversed. Every allurement that could possibly be placed in their way for inducing them to commence the habit of drinking, every facility that could then be devised for enabling

them to indulge it, had been provided by the mistaken legislation (not confined to one political party) of past and present times. No doubt much of this law-making was devised and carried through with entirely different intentions, and led to results which were not only never contemplated, but are even now regarded by its authors with something like dismay. To procure the reversal of that legislation, then, must have come to us in any case as a sacred duty demanding all our best efforts.

But the duty was enhanced and rendered still more imperative by the action of the people themselves. To them, as one by one they were enabled to break loose from the toils which had entangled them, their previous bondage to the system of organized temptation was succeeded by indignation against it. They saw, or thought they saw, that the dearest interests of their class—the happiness of themselves, their wives and sons and daughters—were being deliberately sacrificed for the preservation of a vast trade which literally lived upon their weaknesses. In “respectable neighbourhoods,” it was evident, the owners and occupiers of property had power to keep the objectionable drinking house far from their doors; in their own crowded, and for the most part impoverished, neighbourhoods they had none. New licenses were granted; old ones were used for the devising of new temptations; the quiet public house of other days became the reeking gin palace of the present; corner shops, somehow or another, sprung up blazing with light, abounding in bars; and one and another of these, as the landlord who had made his money retired and passed on his interest to another, were

not unfrequently advertised "to be let" as being "in a good drinking neighbourhood." Was it to be wondered at that legislation came to be invoked by them as of prime importance? And not by them only. Was it not evident that as the thoughtful, better-educated men, not in any way connected with the temperance movement, except as wishing to see their sons and daughters saved from ruin, came to reason upon the subject, they would place this among the foremost standing grievances of their class, and associate together for its removal? Hence the enthusiasm which has gradually taken possession of their minds on the subject of local *option* or *control*. The public houses were said to be "for the accommodation of the people," adapted to the "wants of the locality"—why were the people then literally to have no voice in determining their number or character? Hence, too, the popularity of the Permissive Bill, which proposed to give them power to sweep all the houses away at a stroke. They saw in it a recognition of the rights of the inhabitants of each locality to judge for themselves what their wants were—and that was enough for them. To ourselves, compelled to look a little further, and to ask how far the proposed measure was a reasonable and practicable one, its difficulties seemed insuperable. Our province appeared to be, while recognising the legitimate demand of the people for legislative interference, and especially for local control, to endeavour to give it a right direction. We have introduced into Parliament, therefore, a Bill embodying in its fullest form the principles of local control. It provides that licensing boards shall be formed, in which representatives of the ratepayers shall

be associated with the magistrates in equal numbers, and to which the power shall be given of reducing by what appears to us to be an equitable provision, the number of existing public houses. It is the out-come of years of thought and discussion, and has been matured in conferences held during the last two years in all the principal centres of population. I repeat, what I have before said, legislative action has become an essential part of our work—it is in no way the primary one; in this sense only can we be said to be political.

I come now to the charge of interference in the recent elections.

It was first heard of in the single-handed Liverpool election, when an eminent Liberal Member of Parliament made it a matter of formal complaint that two of our Parochial Branches had taken an active part in favour of Mr. Whitley. The matter became the subject of long and anxious discussion at the next (monthly) meeting of our Executive. It was felt that while corporate action of any kind, or action by our paid and recognised Agents, on one side or the other, was inconsistent with our principles, and must at once, so far as our power reached, be forbidden, we must, at the same time, recognise, and preserve inviolate, the rights of individual members to vote as they pleased, and to take what part they pleased in contested elections. I was requested to prepare a resolution* for the next Executive meeting embodying these views. Before I could do so the dissolution of Parliament had come unexpectedly

* Appendix, Note A.

upon us; and, as the only course then open to us, the views of the Executive were made known in an official announcement which appeared in the *Chronicle*—the organ of the Executive—on the 13th of March.

When the complaints reached us of fresh interferences—not confined to one place, but “from different parts of the country”—we could only ask to be furnished with specific instances. Either these have failed to be produced, or, when produced, have entirely failed to be substantiated. Neither Branches, in their collective capacity as Branches, nor Agents of the Society, can be shown to have interfered, on one side or the other, in the elections.

While, however, the result of these investigations has been to clear the Society, as a Society, from all imputations of partisanship, it has brought out the fact that individuals have exercised their own political rights in favour of temperance views, to an extent which, perhaps, might otherwise have been unknown. Officers and members of the Society, it appears, including clergymen, who would otherwise have supported the Conservative candidates, either abstained from voting or have given their votes on the opposite side. The Borough elections, there is no doubt, have been largely affected by this. But it has done more than this. It has laid bare, with a minuteness of circumstantial detail which leaves nothing to be desired, the causes for such action. The Licensed Victuallers, for the first time I believe in our history, publicly, formally, as a body with interests of their own separate from those of the whole community, had drawn up their test for Parliamentary candidates, upon the acceptance of which their support,

as an united body, was to depend. At a meeting of the Licensed Victuallers' Protection Society of London, Mr. J. F. Deacon, the chairman of the Society, who presided on the occasion, stated that *very complete arrangements had been made for dealing with candidates at the General Election. To every gentleman who sought their suffrages four test questions would be submitted, and the way in which those questions were answered would decide their action towards the candidate. The questions are as follows :—*

1. Will you, if returned to Parliament, oppose every Bill or measure which aims at transferring the licensing powers from the present authorities (the Justices of the Peace) to periodically elected local boards or bodies, municipal, parochial, or the like ?

2. Will you support and advocate the principle that for any depreciation in the value of the property of licensed victuallers, resulting from future legislation, they should be entitled to fair and full pecuniary compensation ?

3. Will you oppose any measure having for its objects the curtailment of, or interference with, the present hours of opening and closing public-houses, either on Sundays or on other days of the week.

4. Will you give your support to any measure having for its object the placing of all "off" licenses under the same authority and regulation as other licenses ?

The acceptance of this test by a candidate was to ensure the publicans' support. It could hardly be, then, but that in doing so it would ensure the temperance voters' opposition. These or other cognate measures were the points for which for years they had been labouring; which they saw to be ripe for settlement; upon which, more than any other measures of domestic or foreign interest, they believed the moral and spiritual advancement of the people of England to depend. Was

“the trade,” with its undoubted influence, to step in at such a juncture and, setting aside every other consideration, whether of imperial or local concern, to dictate to the constituencies, and send to St. Stephen’s a Parliament pledged to the very hilt to resist measures of temperance reform? And if such action was to be neutralised, by what agency could it be if not by the political action of those against whom the combination was levelled? Accordingly, wherever the publicans’ test was presented to the candidates and accepted by them, there is no doubt temperance voters at once ranged themselves on the other side. How largely the issue was affected by this one cause may be inferred, not only from the fact that the reverses were most conspicuous where brewers were the candidates, thirteen of them having lost their seats, and others failed in their candidature; but from the further fact that, when in a subsequent election there was a change of front on the part of the candidate, the decision was reversed. A highly respected parochial clergyman of the city of Oxford, in justification of his vote on the second occasion, which had been withheld on the first, says, in a letter to the public press,* “On Temperance grounds I abstained from using my vote in April. From the candidate I supported on May 8th, I obtained an express promise that he would never oppose Sunday Closing.”

I hope, then, your Lordship will admit that I have established this one point, that it was not the Society acting in any way in its corporate capacity, but the

* *Oxford Times*, May 29, 1880.

consciences of individual members acting in the exercise of their undoubted right of private judgment, which created such disturbance in the calculations of politicians during the recent elections.

But we are threatened with the loss of support on this account. The retaliation is to take the shape of Conservative withdrawal from our ranks.

My Lord, we should deeply, unfeignedly regret such a decision. But not for the sake of the Society itself. It is, I hope, in no spirit of ostentatious religionism that I say the Society is already placed beyond the reach of detriment from any withdrawal of this party or that. Depending from the first on a higher Arm than a mere arm of flesh, believing in our inmost consciences that we are called to do battle for and with our Lord against the most signal development of the kingdom of darkness which our own or any other age of the Church has witnessed, we have been ourselves amazed at the rapid extension and depth to which, under that higher protection, the movement has attained. The Society has its Diocesan organization, more or less complete, in 22 out of the 31 Dioceses. There is scarcely a large town—in some instances scarcely a parish in those towns—in which there is not a parochial Society. It falls to my lot, as Chairman of the Executive, whenever I can spare the time, to attend the Anniversary Meetings of the larger towns. Everywhere I find the same thing—crowded enthusiastic meetings, not infrequently, though held in the largest assembly room of the place, necessitating an overflow meeting, and any reference to the Church as taking its true place as the Church of the people

received with rapturous applause. Nor is this simply the result of the temperance meeting proper. It is found that the parochial society becomes the parent of a variety of efforts, all having for their object the social and moral elevation of the working classes. Bad houses, bad sanitary arrangements, vicious recreations and amusements, unthriftiness—as their intimate relationship to the public house in the way of cause or effect comes to be perceived—are met by their appropriate remedies. The movements for better houses, better sanitary arrangements, allotment gardens, musical and other recreations, penny savings' banks, excursions and other social gatherings, are sure in time to group themselves around the temperance society as a centre, and thus to make the Church, to an extent it has not been heretofore, the visible agent for good among the people. No one who has taken part in the meetings in the great centres of Manchester, Liverpool, Birmingham, and such places, will doubt that a great opportunity is being given to the Church in this way to recover its hold upon these dense masses of population, which, if it be only improved, will vindicate for it its claim to be in the truest sense of the word the Church of the people.*

It is not for the Society itself, then, that we have any fear—it would rather be for the bearing of the whole question upon the politics of the future. Let the idea be once established in the minds of the working classes that either one or the other of the two great political parties in the State has thrown in its

* Appendix, Note C.

lot with the Publican interest, and it is not difficult to see what the consequences would be. A leading statesman has spoken of the masses as being now politically "our masters." The wave of temperance reform which has set in among them is gathering* volume every year. As it advances restrictive legislation in the drink traffic will advance with it. This, again, as temptation will diminish, will continually swell the number of the reforming party. Already their confidence in Parliament has been grievously shaken. They have seen one Parliament undo what another Parliament had done. The 10 o'clock hour of closing, as fixed by the Act of 1872, has been put back to 11; the power of local restriction given and used to such advantage in many places has been taken away; the compulsory endorsement has disappeared; and all this at the instance of the publican party, formulated as their list of grievances, and carried by a majority which they claimed, rightly or wrongly, to have been mainly instrumental in returning. In the present Parliament the attempt to maintain and extend this influence has been repeated, as I have shown, in a more formal and public manner. To have made the attempt argued a surprising ignorance of the extent and character of the forces which had been gathering beneath the surface. That the terms should have been accepted could only have been from the same profound ignorance. The very fact that in some cases the terms were accepted has already given a shock to the minds of the temperance voters which it may be hard to overcome; but let

* Appendix, Note C.

the impression once be stereotyped, that opposition to temperance reform has come to be identified with this or that side of the House; let it be seen that in the division lists the one side, as a rule, is to be found in favour of such measures as local control, Sunday Closing (whole or partial at least), and further restrictive measures, as they may be introduced, the other against them, and their stand in politics will be finally taken on that side, which, from these indications, they believe to have the best interests of the people at heart.

It is not that the temperance voters are incapable of looking at other subjects of political interest, such as the Church or education, or other kindred questions. To the Church, where the Church is leading them, they are naturally drawn; and if there were no more potent influence to sway them in an opposite direction, they would naturally, and to a man, array themselves in its defence. Other questions may from time to time arise which would have a passing interest for them, but that which commands their enthusiasm, which is permanent, paramount, overmastering all other considerations, is the emancipation of themselves, their families, and their class from what they believe to be the tyranny of the present public-house system. Till this is accomplished, call it political blindness or narrowness, or what you will, he who is with them on this point is their friend; he who is against them their foe.

What, then, is the course that I venture to recommend? My Lord, I have no claim to offer advice, further than that which forty years of familiar acquaintance with the working classes—the last twenty in the very close acquaintance derived from this particular subject

—gives; but if I may presume upon this, my earnest advice to politicians of all shades of politics is to try and lift this question above the arena of party warfare. It is that persons of influence of all parties—wherever their influence extends—should attend the meetings of our Society, and should make themselves acquainted with its methods. In doing so, it can scarcely be but their sympathies for their struggling, sorely-tempted, fellows will be enlisted as ours have been, and they will be anxious to take their part in rescuing them from their degradation and in diminishing their temptations. It matters little what form their efforts may take. They may confine themselves to one or other of the objects which the General Section of our Society embraces—the removal of the social or legislative hindrances to temperance. In the latter case they will surely give a candid and unprejudiced hearing to every proposal which comes before the Legislature. Or they may go further and, with the other Section, for the sake of example, deny themselves the indulgence in that which is proving such a stumbling-block to so many of their fellow-countrymen. But in any case, they will have shown their sympathy with them. They will have their confidence. Then as all parties within the walls of Parliament combine to hasten forward measures of temperate, but of real reform, a great stumbling-block will have been removed from the path of the Legislature. Great and momentous issues will, no doubt, from time to time present themselves to the constituencies, issues affecting imperial interests abroad, or the common weal at home, in which, above all things, it is necessary that no side issues shall come

in to disturb the judgment or draw aside the action of those in whose hands the destinies of the country are placed. It will be found that in removing the temperance reforms from the list of unsettled questions, the most formidable of all the side issues will have been taken away. But more than that, a great step will have been taken towards securing that which alone can give security to the nation—an intelligent and thoughtful working class, to whom then, or at any time, the drink has ceased to be the determining influence of their lives.

I am, my Lord,

Your Lordship's faithful Servant,

HENRY J. ELLISON.

WAVE OF TEMPERANCE REFORM.—Since the above was written, the division on Sir W. Lawson's resolution has furnished a remarkable evidence of the truth of what I have advanced. While some, in the recent elections, were pledging themselves to resist all reform, others were promising to support local control in some shape. The division shows unmistakably which direction the course of public opinion is taking.

APPENDIX.

NOTE A.—The Resolution which would have been proposed to the Executive, is the following :—“That while recommending the members of our several Associations to do all in their power to promote the furtherance of Temperance principles in the legislature, it is not desirable that the name of the Church of England Temperance Society should be used by any Branch in a contested election, as supporting one candidate or the other.”

NOTE B.—Mr. Hodgkin, at one of the annual meetings of the Newcastle Branch of the Church Temperance Society, in seconding a resolution, said :—“ I am here as the humble representative of the Dissenters of Newcastle, in order to express the heartfelt delight with which they see the Church of England, with its splendid organization, its wealth, its long-descended culture, its deep learning, and its great fund of common sense, descending into the arena to fight with this giant enemy of us all. I have peculiar pleasure in seeing this Church of England coming to fight, as a Church, in this great campaign against the national enemy. There is always a danger lest the Puritan legislation should be followed by some terrible reaction ; such as the orgies of the Restoration some 200 years ago. “ We must look to the Church of England to bring their great common sense to bear, so that the measures adopted are not Utopian, and not so far in advance of public opinion as to give no chance of success. Above all, we must ask the Church of England, reaching as it does both to throne and to hovel, and including, as it does, far more than any other section of the religious community, both the upper and the very lowest classes of the community—to use its influence with our legislators in altering those degrading laws which tend to increase the influence of drink upon us. And if only the Church does succeed in rooting out this great national vice, the most censorious of critics will scarcely be able to deny that it is the Church of England both in name and in power.”

NOTE C.—*From a Paper read at the recent meeting of the Congress of Church Teachers, at Wolverhampton, by the REV. W. PANCKRIDGE, Vicar of St. Matthew's, City Road.*

“ I instance in evidence the result of the London School Board Elections. I have interested myself very thoroughly in three general elections to the Board. I could show from evidence in my possession that the present Vice-president of the London School Board was carried in the position which he holds on the wave of teetotalism. Ten years ago, I was curate to the parish of which the said gentleman was Vicar. I attended many of his meetings, and helped his canvass, and I formed my opinion on this point, years before I had anything to do with temperance work itself, and when I rejected teetotalism as a snare and a delusion. But take another instance. One of the most prominent of the working men in the neighbourhood from which I come, himself twice elected at the head of the poll, by a large majority of votes, from a constituency which numbers over 50,000 voters, also very largely owes his present position to the fact that he is a recognized teetotal advocate, week by week on Sunday evenings. Mr. Lucraft addresses large gatherings of his class upon the virtues of tea. At the last general election for the School Board of London, I asked several members of my own congregation—sensible and sound churchmen, regular communicants, well wishers of the National Church, Conservatives in feeling, anxious for denominational education, themselves having children in the Church Schools—‘ For whom do you mean to vote?’ ‘ For the Church candidate and the teetotaler,’ was the answer; and they would only consent to split their vote in this way, and even then, I have no doubt, with the cumulative vote, it was two for the Church candidate, and four for the teetotaler.”

